

Step-By-Step Site Planner

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This is how you build a house. First, buy lots of wood, nails, windows, doors and paint. How much, you ask? I don't know - a lot. Next, hire a crew of carpenters and tell them to go for it. Then, ask the guy who drives the concrete mixer to pour his load wherever he thinks the driveway should go.

Blueprints? A plan? No time for all that. You know what a house looks like, and, besides, you don't want to stifle creativity with a bunch of formalities.

Think again, Sparky. Whether you're building the family domicile or your organization's Website, you need to start with a plan. An effective plan starts with quality information, and to get quality information you need to ask the right questions.

Here's a Site Planner, a collection of focused questions to help you jump-start the information gathering process. Each section (Background, Audience, Resources, Competition and Content) asks several basic questions along with "Next Steps" for detailed follow-up.

For best results involve as many stakeholders as possible -- business/process owners, marketing and sales staff, IT folks, content managers, developers and customers.

Ready? Sharpen your pencils and roll up your sleeves. And good luck enhancing your Web presence!

Background

- **Goals.** What are your specific goals? Consider:
 - company/brand awareness,
 - product/services awareness,
 - product/services sales,
 - community building,
 - entertainment,
 - knowledge sharing, and
 - internal communications.
- **Promotional Fit.** How should your Website fit with current promotional and marketing strategies and materials?
- **Deadlines.** What are the schedule or deadline requirements?
- **Funding.** What are the budgetary constraints?
- **Measurement.** How will you measure the success of the site?

Next Steps:

1. Develop a ranked (from most- to least-important) Goals Master List.
2. Create a mission statement for the site.
3. Identify how the mission and goals of the site might change from short-term to long-term, given the direction of your organization and industry.

Audience

- **External.** Who is your EXTERNAL audience? Consider:
 - current customers,
 - potential customers,
 - suppliers,
 - professional/trade organizations,

About the Author

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- investors,
- competitors,
- children,
- schools/educators, and
- the sight-impaired.

- **Internal.** Who is your INTERNAL audience? Consider:

- all employees,
- management,
- marketing/sales,
- operations, and
- IT.

- **Sub-groups.** Determine all subgroups within the audiences identified above.

- **Define.** Identify the interests, technical skills and special issues for each audience group and subgroup.

Next Steps:

1. Create a ranked Audience Master List.
2. Develop an Aligned Master List by matching the Audience Master List to the Goals Master List.
3. Create usage scenarios based on Aligned Master List.

Resources

- **Project Roles.** Who are the resources that will be responsible for content management and technical support (include their names, titles, roles, and contact info)?
- **Team Skills.** What are the technical and content management skills of each resource?

Next Steps:

For each resource, identify any training, software, hardware, scheduling and budgetary issues.

Competition

- **Identify Competitors.** Identify the sites of competitors and others that may provide direction for your site.
- **Important Elements.** Identify the important elements of each competitor site:

- functional features,
- technologies used,
- breadth of content and
- look-and-feel.

Next Steps:

1. Develop a competitive analysis that includes the important elements of key competitor sites and which of these elements your site should match, exceed, or avoid.
2. On a regular basis, revisit key competitor sites and update your competitive analysis.

Content

- **Functionality.** Which functional features should your site offer? Consider:

- ecommerce/shopping cart,
- site search,
- customer service/support,
- tech support,
- discussion forums,
- newsletter,
- catalog/information
- order forms,
- feedback form,

- member logon,
 - password protected areas, and
 - SSL-encrypted areas.
- **Information.** Which informational elements should your site contain? Consider:
 - About Us page,
 - Contact Us page,
 - copyright notice, and
 - privacy statement.
- **Structure.** What is your site's hierarchy? For each of the 4-7 (though you can have more or less) main areas of the site, identify:
 - each main menu item,
 - all submenu items, and
 - additional content.

Think of a tree-style hierarchy with the home page at the top.

Next Steps:

1. Describe in detail each functional feature. What exactly will it do?
2. Identify the resources required, and any technical and budgetary issues associated with each functional feature.
3. Provide detail for each informational element.
4. Assign content responsibilities to the resources identified above.

Summary

Experience shows that questions raised and answered in one section may engender ideas and issues in other sections. This is a good thing, and reinforces the fact that the Site Planner can (and probably should) be used iteratively. In fact, we've found it useful for periodic reviews of existing Websites.

The more time and effort your organization devotes to this information gathering process, the more likely you are to build an effective, customer-driven and well-staffed Web presence.

Happy planning!